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WEST BREMERTON

Fire razes complex

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UNDER PRESSURE: Area firefighters battled a raging inferno that swept through a storage facility on Thompson Avenue in West Bremerton on Thursday. No one was hurt, but some vintage motor vehicles and other valuables were destroyed. Cause of the fire was under investigation.

Towering black plumes of smoke billowed sky-high from the neighborhood of Bremerton High School late Thursday afternoon as firefighters from three departments fought a raging blaze at Penn Plaza Industrial Park.

The two-alarm fire destroyed six garage-sized storage units built of corrugated metal in the older portion of the complex, but no one was hurt.

Firefighters battled the blaze for a half-hour. They still were mopping up hot spots more than two hours later.

Jack Johnson, owner of Bremerton Auto Detailing, was the first to spot the fire.

"I found it," he said later, watching firefighters hose down the still-smoking buildings and their contents. "I just smelled smoke, drove around and felt the (warm) building. Then flames shot through the roof, and that was it."

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That was it for Ed Paulus' 1964 Harley Davidson and his dragster, stored in one of the burned-out units along with another renter's huge inventory of piston rings, which he markets worldwide.

Paulus said he is uninsured.

"That's \$20,000 down the drain," he said.

The fire also spelled the end to William Radford's boat, camper and 1965 Mustang stored in another unit.

The thick smoke from the fire, which collapsed the corrugated buildings, could be seen from Port Orchard and even as far away as Seattle.

Bremerton Fire Inspector Mike Secrist said there was no information about what caused the fire or where it started, and it was too early to assess total damage.

Some tenants called to warn of hazardous materials such as acetylene canisters stored inside the buildings, but Secrist said most pressurized containers are equipped with safety devices that release pressure in intense heat to prevent serious explosion.

The industrial park, at 1600 Thompson Ave., is a mix of older and newer buildings a block from the Port Washington Narrows, and contains numerous thriving businesses like Johnson's.

It is in the middle of a residential neighborhood, but the fire never posed a hazard to homes and no one was evacuated. All of the damage was to storage units. None of the businesses suffered any fire damage.

The complex is owned by Paul McConkey.

Shortly after the fire began at 6:15 p.m., Bremerton police blocked local arterials to all but neighborhood traffic as hordes of sightseers followed the smoke.

At Lions Field, on the other side of Port Washington Narrows from the fire, parents hustled their children off the beach to get them away from the drifting smoke, which smelled like toxic chemicals. But a baseball game at the park continued.

Power was turned off in the neighborhood, also affecting residents along Margurite Avenue.


Donna Gay Boyle of Tracyton said the buildings were once Lent's Inc. mechanical contractors; her family's business.

The buildings that burned were originally the firm's automotive shops, she said, and date back to at least World War II.

Radford, who worked at the complex for 18 years before his employer relocated, said the conversion of some buildings to storage has changed the nature of the complex.

"It was never dangerous when there were people working there," he said, "but there just hasn't been enough people around."

In addition to engines and a ladder truck from Bremerton Fire Department, units from Central Kitsap Fire and Rescue and Puget Sound Federal Fire Department at Puget Sound Naval Shipyard also responded.

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